

EMERSON, MINISTRY....

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READING

Exodus 20:8-11 – the Fourth Commandment

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

SERMON

Sometimes I do wonder what kind of audacity it takes to stand here week after week and presume to say something of meaning to you. If I thought about it that way all the time, I probably wouldn't be here. It's not that I think you need to hear what I have to say, it's more that I am profoundly called to say it. There are things I think and feel that seem important enough that I can't keep them inside me. That you are gracious enough to hear me out, that you seem to think that it's important, too, is sometimes a wonderment to me. It is always a grace.

Sometimes folks ask how I keep finding new things to say. It's really not a problem. I've got sermons percolating right now that will take me well into next year. I do not need a sabbatical because I'm running out of things to say. Rather, sometimes I feel like I've got too much to say and not enough time to think about it clearly and systematically.

The demands of the modern ministry are varied. There is the pull to try to be all things to all people. I resist it, and you as a congregation graciously help me resist. The ministry engages me body, mind, heart and soul, and I couldn't have it any other way. Yet all that makes me eternally grateful for the time-honored tradition in our ministry of the sabbatical.

It was different back in the day – take Emerson's day for instance. The minister had two main roles – pastor and preacher – and even that was too much for some. It's true, the minister preached just about every Sunday, and the sermons were at least twice as long as they are today (which is partly why the time-honored tradition of the pulpit exchange arose). Yet during the week, the minister worked on *his* sermon and made pastoral calls to the members of his flock. But that was really about it.

From the vantage point of the modern ministry, it does seem like such a simpler time. There is so much more to the work today. A minister works with committees and boards, meets with new members, is supposed to know something about budgets and administration, supervising a staff, governance models and religious education. Then there's community outreach and justice work, and now there are websites and social networking technologies like Facebook (which still gives me the jitters).

Yet really it was never especially easy. As illustration, I share with you a story I've told before about one of our revered forebears Ralph Waldo Emerson, and someone known mostly to seminarians because we fear he'll come up in a question at the Ministerial Fellowship Committee – one Barzillai Frost. Both were Unitarian ministers in the first half of the 19th century when Unitarianism was still new in America.

In 1838, Emerson addressed the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School. An alumnus of that institution, Emerson had served as the minister of Second Unitarian Church in Boston from 1829-1832. By the time he addressed the Harvard grads he had published his first book of essays.

In the Divinity School Address, Emerson decried the state of preaching in Unitarian churches of the time, using words like "routine," "extinct," and "famine." He said, "Whenever a pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us."

Then he really got going.

“I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more. . . . A snow-storm was falling around us. The snow-storm was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it.”

I will stop quoting there, but Emerson went on. And everyone in the room knew exactly of whom he was speaking. When he was not traveling to preach in other churches or on the lecture circuit, Emerson was a regular attendee at the church in Concord, which had recently called a new associate minister, yes, Barzillai Frost. And just in case anyone missed it, Emerson deliberately used wintry imagery, saying essentially that the frost outside the window was more inspiring than the Frost inside.

My heart has always gone out to poor Barzillai, a new minister, so publicly dissected and criticized. History has not recorded his response to Emerson’s address. Much of the rest of the Unitarian clergy in Boston, at whom Emerson was also aiming, were outraged. I can imagine that many of the new graduates embarking on the ministry, idealistic and enthusiastic, were thrilled at Emerson’s skewering of their elders.

Apparently, Barzillai Frost was never more than a mediocre preacher. Yet he served in Concord for many years and was much beloved by his congregation as a tireless pastor who regularly called on the homes of those in his flock.

Ironically, in Emerson’s own brief career as a minister, such pastoral calls were his bane. He was a wonderful preacher, but he was not especially warm and cuddly. Once, a story goes, he spent an afternoon on a pastoral visit to a woman who he thought was a member of Second Unitarian, only to have it turn out to be a woman of same name who belonged to a very different church. When the visit was over, the woman suggested that Emerson find another line of work.

Indeed, it was not long before he did. Emerson left the ministry for many reasons – personal, theological and practical – and his congregation was sorry to see him go. It is no coincidence that leaving the parish ministry gave Emerson latitude to pursue his calling more fully and become an essayist, lecturer and philosopher.

I tell you this story in part to illustrate – as if you haven’t figured it out by the present example – that no one minister has all the gifts of ministry in equal measure. No minister can ever minister alone. And I don’t minister alone. I have all of you with me.

And now that I am leaving for a sabbatical, our shared ministry will be given a workout. Of course, some anxiety arises in this. As far as I know, this congregation has never had a minister take a sabbatical, and I have never taken one. That’s one of the reasons for this 6-week test run now in the fall, before I leave for a longer time in the spring.

The anxiety folks feel is natural and real. I have my own as evidenced by the whacking stress dream last week in which I was begging an old, annoying college friend to take care of my cats and cursing myself for leaving something so important till the last minute. Truth is, I have some great house-sitters, so it’s wildly clear to me that the dream was about all the things that I won’t get done before I leave, and something about guilt at leaving you all.

The sabbatical tradition arises out of recognition of all that is asked of the minister. In recognition of the need for study, reflection and well, just rest. In truth, I don’t read much during the year, and little of it is the serious reading I long to do. You should see the stack of books by my front door waiting to be taken on sabbatical with me.

Yet there is another very important function of the sabbatical that is easy to overlook – separating the church from the minister. Because the minister appears to lie at the center of the church. It's very easy to confuse the minister with the church. And that leads to worry of what will happen if the minister is gone.

Now, different denominations deal with this differently. In Catholicism, the priest really is the church. Certainly, he is God's representative on Earth. Catholics can't get to God but through the priest and the sacraments administered by the priest. Thus, the structure is very authoritarian and top down.

Methodists, on the other hand, have almost the opposite attitude. Methodist ministers change churches about every three years. Ministers are not called by the church, but by the denomination. The idea is that the people's loyalty should be to the church and the community, not to the minister. If a minister stays too long, the confusion can set in. This system might feel disruptive to both minister and congregation, but it is clear that the minister is not the church.

Under our congregational polity, it is clear too. The congregation is the central locus of authority and can call its own minister. And the minister, called and installed, is not the only minister in the congregation. Our theology affirms what James Luther Adams called the "priest and prophethood of all believers." Not only is there no mediator between the people and their God, all are called upon to embody this faith in concrete ways.

Nevertheless, once a minister is called and installed and stays around any length of time, it's very easy to lose sight of the prophethood of all believers and rest all ministerial authority in the minister with the title before her name.

But without me here, you will be able to re-gain your understanding that you are the church, that you are all ministers in this church.

So, while I fully expect to get lots of rest, take walks on the beach, read and write and have time for some play, I also fully expect to come back and, as Mick said happened to him, to hear your "stories of transformation. [How] everyone pitched in and supported each other." About the bumps along the way, and how you handled them and laughed and learned.

So here's some of what you can do during the sabbatical to help you remember who and what the church is.

Come to church – regularly.

The Worship Associates need your support and you need them. They are living examples of the priest and prophethood of all believers. Because our theology embraces many voices, it is imperative that there are many voices in this pulpit. Yes, you'll have Rev. Dr. Emily Brault up here regularly as well as a few guest speakers. Yet the ones holding our services together will be our lay leaders. The Worship Associates are you and you are them. You know that there is not one voice, one perspective, one office that has a lock on the truth, uncovering the holy, communicating the dictates of the spirit. Live your theology by listening to the many voices in this pulpit while I am away. Open your heart to what they have to say, what their experience and perspective has told them about what is holy, what is right, what is good.

And reach out to each other when you are in need. Our Pastoral Associates, too, embody our theology in embracing our pastoral ministry. They will be there when you are in need. And so are many other groups in the church, from the knitting circle to chalice circles to the folks across a table at the Harvest Festival next Sunday. Reach out to one another, for you are the church.

A colleague says this about his own pastoral ministry, "I don't want to take care of them. I want them to take care of each other." Take care of each other.

There are lots of people stepping up to do the work of the church while I am away. Be one of them, in some small way or in a grand one. At the very least, support them. Show up to the events they plan. (Yes, that may mean, entering the chili cook-off at the Harvest Festival). Say yes when people ask you to help.

Have some fun with it all. Open your meetings with silly poems. Be kind to one another, and forgiving of missteps.

While I am gone, my great hope is that you will be reminded of what and who the church really is. That you will be empowered and transformed. And I hope you will see it all as a grand dance.

So while I am on extended Sabbath, remember your own and keep it holy.

Sing, play, weep, discuss, vent, embrace, eat chili, laugh, hold on, breathe, let go, let love guide and dance together.

Amen. May it be so.